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ABSTRACT

In a multicultural classroom it is the seemingly small issues, such as classroom informality or interpersonal relationships between male and female students, that can cause misunderstandings and problems. This paper delineates a simple assessment tool to determine what behaviors might be a source of potential discomfort in the classroom. The tool is based on Giger and Davidhizar (1995) criteria that determine a culturally unique individual. The assessment tool analyzes aspects of six cultural phenomena: communication, personal space, social organization, time, environmental control, and biological variation. The tool is divided into three sections: the first section consists of 18 questions focusing on cultural perceptions regarding time, personal space, interpersonal communication, touch, and select social issues such as food that have implications in the classroom setting; the second section contains 32 "yes or no" questions focusing on select areas of cultural beliefs and values; and the third section asks for brief demographic data such as sex, age, religion, occupation, and country of birth. The tool was piloted with a population of 35 individuals ranging in age from 12 to 59 years old, of diverse religions and nationalities, and enrolled in middle school, high school, community college, or university. The cultural assessment tool is appended. (BT)

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The Development of A Cultural Assessment Tool:

Paving the Way to a Culturally Comfortable Classroom:

Joanne Tootla and Patricia Vint

April 2001

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The typical American classroom of past generations was basically homogenous in terms of cultural composition. Although individual students had unique backgrounds, they shared a common culture based on traditional European values and Judeo-Christian ethics. This cultural thread provided for a sense of belonging and cohesiveness. Today's classroom, in contrast, is comprised of individuals from all areas of the globe with a myriad of cultural norms, social mores, and religious rules and rituals. This tremendous diversity and lack of cultural commonality can lead to feelings of alienation, anxiety, and tension. This paper will look at a cultural development tool designed to increase a sense of comfort in a multicultural classroom setting without sacrificing the educational process.

Defined in many ways, assessment is the basis for action as it drives interventions, influences outcomes, and makes evaluation possible. Bastable (1997) quotes Tripp-Reimer and Afifi in defining cultural assessment as "A systemic appraisal of beliefs, values, and practices conducted in order to determine the context of client needs..."(p. 185). Sedlacek and Kim (1995) define multicultural assessment as" the actual context in which the assessment is conducted, namely one in which people of different cultures interact" (p.1). In education, assessment can be viewed as "any method used to better understand the current knowledge that a student possesses" (Dietel, Herman & Knuth, 1991, p. 1). It can be as simple as the subjective observation of a single instructor or as complex as a multi-hour standardized test.

Assessments serve a variety of functions in an academic setting. They are used to plan and evaluate programs, designate priorities, motivate students, and identify student strengths and limitations. They are important in diagnosing student problems and

assisting students to make informed and wise educational and career decisions. They are most commonly recognized for their ability to monitor academic progress and to determine grades.

The cultural meanings that shape an individual's thoughts, perceptions, and actions influence the atmosphere and tone of a classroom. Simple behaviors that are taken for granted in one culture can impact either positively or negatively upon those who do not share the same cultural standards. In many instances, it is the small nuances of a culture that cause the biggest problems.

In the Islamic culture, for example, segregation by sex is common. Men and women socialized within gender boundaries with men in one room and women occupying another. Physical touching between the sexes is strictly limited to contact only between close family members. In the social context of the classroom, a non-Muslim female extending a hand for a handshake with a Muslim male, might witness the man crossing his hands across his chest. The female could interpret this behavior as rejection, a sense of superiority, or a form of gender prejudice. The male might simply be complying with his cultural norm of avoiding physical contact with a member of the opposite sex. There is no disrespect intended, and the male might be shocked to have his behavior interpreted in a negative manner.

Food is another area where problems may arise. While it is generally known that different religion have dietary restrictions, there are a number of other factors that can cause significant misunderstandings. Religions that restrict meat or pork often go beyond the mere avoidance of actual flesh. Labels are often scrutinized to determine whether a meat by-product is used with what is commonly perceived to be a non-meat product. For

example, lard is sometimes used in breads and pastry products. A devote follower will need to avoid a pastry product containing lard even though this behavior may seem extreme to the uninformed. Even foods such as ice cream, yogurt and milk might be considered suspect, as some individuals fear the inclusion of meat by-products used in either the product's preparation or preservation. It needs to be noted that while strict government regulations govern food manufacturing in the United States, this is not the case in other countries. Often meat by-products are used in product preparation or preservation techniques {Abdussumed Tootla, personal communication).

There are a number of dietary restrictions that impact vegetarians. Some Hindu sects avoid eating root- vegetables that grow under the ground. These include such common vegetables as onions, potatoes, carrots, turnips, and radishes. The author knows individuals who will eat the leaves of radish plants, but will not eat the actual radish; since the radish greens grow above ground while the radish is a root vegetable and is forbidden. Other sects avoid foods reminiscent of human blood such as beets and tomatoes.

Even the containers used to serve food can be problematic. The author has a Hindu friend who is a strict vegetarian. She will not eat on ceramic or china dishes because bone china contains small fragments of animal bone. If the dish should chip, it is theoretically possible that she could ingest a small fragment of the dish and thus violates her religious beliefs (Rekha Khera, personal communication). Food is served on metal trays or eaten from paper plates.

Cultural norms also impact on educational expectations. Problems may exist when cultures normally segregated by gender are placed together in a classroom. Women

traditionally unaccustomed to mingling with men may find the setting uncomfortable. Even when genders have been placed together in a classroom, females may be more reluctant to participate in discussions or to answer questions with the same eagerness and ease as males based on their cultural backgrounds. Some males might find the prospect of a female instructor strange, unacceptable, or intimidating.

Gestures can also be an area of misunderstanding. Body language means different things to different groups of people. For example, a gesture used in Canada to beckon people, is considered rude by the Vietnamese because that gesture is used only for animals in Vietnam (A resource guide... , 2001).

Even within American society some seemingly innocent behaviors can have significant consequences. In a laboratory setting where nursing students were practicing physical assessment skills, a faculty member noted that one of the students had a skin disorder known as psoriasis. Without obtaining the student's permission, the faculty had the other students observe her skin. The student withdrew from the nursing program the next day. It was only much later, that another faculty member found out that the student had been extremely self –conscious and embarrassed by her skin condition. To have her psoriasis displayed for other students to look at was mortifying and she felt no option but to withdraw in order to protect her dignity and self-esteem (Joan Green, personal communication).

Some traditional learning systems place a heavy emphasis on formality. Teachers are addressed by title, hands are raised in responding to teacher questions, and students may be expected to stand when giving their answers. Uniforms may be common, assigned seating in rows the norm, and free movement around the classroom unknown.

A student from South Africa, who recently enrolled at a suburban high school in Michigan, was shocked by the difference between the two school systems. He was totally unprepared for the informality between faculty and students, the lack of any standardized dress code, and the freedom of movement permitted in the classroom. He was amazed at the amount and intensity of interpersonal relationships between male and female students in school (Ebrahim Tootla, personal communication).

McGroarty (1993) writes of her experience placing ESL students in a circle to facilitate interaction and communication.

> I was concerned to see that , after a few minutes, one of the men in the class turned nearly rigid and stared straight ahead. When I asked after class what was wrong, he told me that with the class sitting in a circle, and thus moving their heads to look at me and each other when conversing, he was sure the other men were looking at his wife, a behavior he considered inappropriate (p. 2).

It is these seemingly small issues that can cause misunderstandings and problems in a multicultural classroom. In an attempt to create an atmosphere of cultural respect and comfort, the author has designed a simple assessment tool to determine what behaviors might be a source of potential discomfort in the classroom. The tool was based on Giger and Davidhizar (1995) criteria that determine a culturally unique individual. Giger and Davidhizer identified six cultural phenomena such as communication, personal space, social organization, time, environmental control, and biological variation. The cultural assessment tool looks at select aspects from their cultural unique individual criteria (Appendix).

The tool is divided into three sections. The first section consists of 18 questions focusing on cultural perceptions regarding time, personal space, interpersonal communication, touch, and select social issues such as food that have implications in the classroom setting. Section two, contains thirty -two yes or no questions focusing on select areas of cultural beliefs and values. The third section asks for brief demographic data such as sex, age, religion, occupation, and country of birth. Demographic data was deliberately placed at the end of the tool to promote a sense of comfort, to reduce any feelings of intimidation, and to promote a sense of anonymity.

The tool was piloted with a population of 35 individuals consisting of 12 males and 23 females. Individuals ranged in age from 12 years to 59 years old. Participants described their religion as Moslem, Protestant, Christian, Presbyterian, Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, and Child of God. Places of birth included the United States, South Africa, Bosnia, Syria, the Caribbean, and the Philippines. Education levels included students currently enrolled in a middle school, a high school, a community college and a major university. Many participants already had college degrees including some with master degrees and others with medical degrees. One individual only completed eighth grade in her native country. Occupations represented included students, housewives, an elementary school teacher, a housekeeper, registered nurses, nurse educators, two physicians, a surgeon, a radiologist, two ward clerks, a sheriff, two fire- fighters, two medical emergency technicians, a cashier, and a teacher's assistant.

Participants were asked for comments regarding the tool. Suggestions included changing section two from its original agree or disagree format to yes or no answ s, as many individuals thought yes/no were easier options. Some thought that more choices

should be available for each answer, but others thought that adding additional options would make the questions more confusing. Almost everyone had a special question that they wanted included on the questionnaire. Four people for example, wanted a question specifically asking about a belief in angels. One male wanted a question asking about rudeness when talking in an elevator. Five individuals wanted more questions related to male/female issues while others wanted more specific situations included in the tool. Some people wanted more demographic data included such as whether the participant had ever traveled outside the country.

In general, people were eager to participate in the pilot project. Often, while one person was answering a question, another person would come up and ask if they could also take "the test." Nursing faculty members as a group seemed to have the most difficulty as they identified conflict between their actions and their beliefs. They were also the only individuals who were concerned about answering "correctly.' Even when reminded that there were no right or wrong answers, many made comments indicating that they did perceive a value judgment. One faculty member stated, "Now you'll find out where our prejudices are." No other group or individual expressed such concerns.

The questionnaire generated considerable comments. Many stated that it made them think about issues that they never really thought about before. Some discovered that there was a conflict between their beliefs and actions. A nursing faculty member noted, "Now I know why I grind my teeth at night. I never knew I had such conflict between what I believe and what I actually do."

There were many similarities between the answers of native- born Americans, foreign- born Americans, and foreign- born non-Americans on many of the questions. For

example, most respondents believed that an individual should be considered late if they were between fifteen and thirty minutes after their scheduled appointment time, education was very important, and teachers deserved respect. Only one South African male felt that a husband had the right to discipline his wife. Two South African-Americans and two native-born Americans felt that it was inappropriate for a woman to be the boss of a man. Three foreign-born Americans believed that men should be the leaders of their family compared to three American-born individuals. Eleven American-born respondents believed that American society was too formal compared to only two foreign-born Americans. Sharing food was an issue for both groups with equal numbers of both groups finding it difficult to share food with classmates or co-workers. A small number of the foreign-born had no experience working with groups or in presenting information in front of a group. A small number of American born and non-American born identified some discomfort if they had to work with group members consisting of both males and females.

Information gained from the tool can facilitate the education process. For example, sitting in a circle should not be abandoned as a teaching strategy, but its placement should occur later in the course when a certain amount of familiarity with classmates has occurred. Explaining the purpose for the seating arrangement will also help to eliminate feelings of negativism and discomfort. Sharing food in the classroom can lead to a discussion of how culture and religion influences food preference and impacts on daily life.

The tool is not designed as a comprehensive cultural assessment. It is not all inconclusive covering every major area impacting on culture. It is merely a means to

determine some beliefs and values that students may bring with them into the academic setting. By identifying potential areas of conflict, the instructor can make for a more comfortable classroom and avoid perceptions that can turn into problems.

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Appendix

Cultural Assessment

Select the answer that most closely agrees with your opinion. There are no right or wrong answers – only individual perceptions or beliefs. All responses are anonymous. Do not put your name on this form.

1. I believe that being on time for meetings is:
   A. Very important
   B. Somewhat important
   C. Somewhat unimportant
   D. Unimportant

2. If a student regularly comes to class 10 minutes late, I would think:
   A. The student was rude and disrespectful
   B. The student did not value his/her education
   C. The student was selfish
   D. There was no problem

3. If I had to sit in a circle for a class or presentation, I would feel:
   A. Comfortable
   B. Uncomfortable
   C. Comfortable if everyone was of the same sex, but uncomfortable if both sexes were mixed together

4. I think immigrants to another country should:
   A. Keep their own values and cultures
   B. Try to become like the people of the new country
   C. Keep their own culture, but try to blend in to the new society
   D. Live with people like themselves to keep their original culture intact

5. Going to college or university is:
   A. Important
   B. Somewhat important
   C. Not all that important
   D. Unimportant

6. My primary reason for attending this class is:
   A. I'm interested in the topic
   B. I need a job as soon as possible
   C. Someone is sponsoring/paying for my education
   D. Other: Specify_____

7. Standing up in front of the class to do a presentation is:
    A. Something I have done before
    B. Something I have never done before

8. Doing a presentation in front of a classroom:
    A. Would be fun and an interesting experience
    B. Would be very intimidating
    C. Would be a challenge, but I could deal with it
    D. Would be so stressful that I would think about dropping the class

9. Working on projects in a group is:
    A. Something I have done before
    B. Something I have never done before

10. If I had to work on a group project and all the members were of the same sex, I would:
    A. Feel comfortable working with the group
    B. Feel intimidated by working with a group
    C. Feel very uncomfortable working with the group
    D. Seriously consider dropping the class

11. If I had to work on a group project and all the members were not of the same sex, I would:
    A. Feel comfortable working with the group
    B. Feel intimidated working with the group
    C. Feel very uncomfortable working with the group
    D. Seriously consider dropping the class

12. I would identify myself:
    A. First by my religion, then by my culture
    B. First by my culture, then by my religion
    C. Equally by culture and religion
    D. Only by my culture
    E. Only by my religion
    F. By my citizenship

13. I think family needs should:
    A. Always come first
    B. Sometimes be sacrificed for a job or other reasons
    C. Never interfere with the needs of an individual family member
    D. Should come second to job responsibilities

14. Direct eye contact:
    A. Is a sign of good communication skills
    B. Is a sign of disrespect

15. Shaking hands with a person of the opposite sex:
    A. Is a polite gesture
    B. Is inappropriate in certain situations
    C. Is always inappropriate

16. A friend tells you that they will be arriving at your house at 6:30 p.m. At what time would you consider them late?
    A. 6:35p.m.
    B. 6:45 p.m.
    C. 7:00 p.m.
    D. 7:15 p.m.
    E. Later than 7:15 p.m.

17. In determining an individual's success in life, I think that luck:
    A. Is most important
    B. Is somewhat important
    C. Is not as important as hard word and dedication
    D. Is not important at all

18. You are in a grocery store checking out your purchases. The cashier and the person putting your groceries in a bag are speaking a foreign language that you do not understand. What is your opinion of this situation?
    A. There is no problem
    B. They are being unprofessional
    C. They are being insensitive
    D. They are being rude.

Yes or No: Circle Yes if you agree with the answer. Circle No if you do not agree with the answer.

19. Yes No Teachers deserve to be treated with respect.

20. Yes No Girls who wear shorts and sleeveless tops usually have poor morals.

21. Yes No touching a person of the opposite sex makes me feel uncomfortable.

22. Yes No Women who cover their hair come from the lower class.

23. Yes No Americans tend to be very loud.

24. Yes No If people talk to one another in their native language out in public they are being rude.

25.	Yes	No	Direct eye contact is a challenge to another person.
26.	Yes	No	There are some jobs women should not do
27.	Yes	No	Women should be submissive to men.
28.	Yes	No	I would feel uncomfortable if my boss were significantly younger than I am.
29.	Yes	No	Men and women should earn the same wages for the same work.
30.	Yes	No	I would follow my religion even if I had to break the law.
31.	Yes	No	Americans are very judgmental.
32.	Yes	No	Women who cover their heads are oppressed.
33.	Yes	No	I would use a unisex bathroom (a public bathroom that is used by men and women)
34.	Yes	No	Raising a family is woman's work.
35.	Yes	No	Men should always be the leaders of their family.
36.	Yes	No	People who dress in their ethnic clothes out in public are inferior.
37.	Yes	No	A woman should have the permission of her father or husband before going to school or getting a job.
38.	Yes	No	Men should share child-rearing responsibilities.
39.	Yes	No	People from other countries are too critical of American society.
40.	Yes	No	I believe in magic. (witchcraft; sorcery)
41.	Yes	No	Men should help with household responsibilities.
42.	Yes	No	If a woman disobeys her husband, it is permissible for him to discipline or punish her.
43.	Yes	No	I would feel comfortable sharing food from my classmates or co-workers.
44.	Yes	No	I would be uncomfortable if my instructor was of a different sex than me.

45. Yes No Men should make the financial decisions in the family.

46. Yes No There are some jobs that men should not do.

47. Yes No It is inappropriate for a woman to be the boss of a man.

48. Yes No American society is too informal.

49. Yes No Adults should be called by titles such as Mr. or Mrs. by children.

50. Yes No Americans tend to reveal too much personal information about themselves.

Please complete the following demographic data. **DO NOT** put your name on this paper.

1. Sex_____

2. Age: _____

3. Religion_____

4. What is your country of birth? _____

5. What is your highest level of education? _____

6. What is your present occupation?_____

5. What jobs have you held in the past? _____

6. Are you an U.S. citizen: YES_____ NO_____

If no: What country are you a citizen of? _____
How long have you been in the United States? _____

Thank you for completing this assessment.

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